

WRITING SAMPLES

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**LETTERS ABOUT
LITERATURE**

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WHAT CHILDREN WRITE TO AUTHORS

"You've got mail" is an understatement for me during the months of November and December. Each year, the post office delivers white plastic mail bins by the dozens filled with correspondence from children across the country. I am not the person to whom they are writing, but I and my staff are the ones who read their very personal letters.

*Dear Ben Mikaelson,
A student pushed a ten-year-old boy off a school bus causing him to land facedown on the ground, "just to be funny." The bus driver drove away after asking only halfheartedly if the boy was "okay." Imagine this same boy shoved into the corner of the school building while three students held him down, twisting and pinching his skin....The principal dismissed the actions as "just boy's horseplay." The boy felt scared, hurt, and alone. I was that boy.*

This opening paragraph to author Ben Mikaelson was written by a middle school student in North Carolina. The letter is about the novel *Petey*. It is also about something else – bullying, yes, but also adult reaction to bullying incidents.

Letters About Literature invites children to write to an author whose work has somehow changed the child's view of the world or self. We encourage our reader-writers to explore their personal response to the work and then to express that response in a creative, original way. Do not summarize or critique the book or short story or poem, we advise. Rather, write from the heart. They do not disappoint.

As the LAL project director, I see what the state and national judges do not – the minimal letters as well as the exceptional ones; the struggling readers and writers as well as the polished ones. I see something else, as well – a tapestry of themes, woven from New England to the South, from the Midwest to the West. The dominant themes on all three competition levels – upper elementary, middle school, and high school – is dealing with peer pressure and bullying, discovering for the first time a sense of self-worth, war and humankind's inhumanity to others, and coping with loss, from death, disease, or just plain adolescent disappointment. Interestingly, not one book or one author is better than another for helping young people understand these complicated issues. For the boy who wrote to Ben Mikaelson, *Petey* brought back painful memories but also insights – that he is older and stronger now, and that it takes guts to look "beyond ourselves."

For Lucas, a high school student, deliverance from drugs came after reading Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*. For Paul, a middle school student in Colorado, Charles Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic, as recounted in *The Spirit of St. Louis*, helped him rise above depression.

When I finished the last page, I closed the book and I knew that I had changed. I had been there when you took off from a New York field. I had been in the cockpit as you endured the grueling flight across the Atlantic Ocean. I had been there when you landed in France. . . . And you had been there for me. When I was ready to crash and burn, you helped me escape the abyss and get back on my wings and in the air. Your flight kept me flying, and has kept me flying still. You have helped me live a life worth living.

Over the past two years alone, 100,000 young readers have entered this competition. Each year I am impressed by the depth of meaning children have gotten from the stories they read. We need not dumb down our literature. If what we write and publish has meaning, our children will extend their arms and reach for our words. More importantly, they'll hold on to them. Recent research suggests that personal reader responses and reflective writing, as evident in these letters, can indeed help to produce successful readers. And successful readers are lifelong readers.

Books are not the only venue that allow children to relate to others or to suggest a way of coping with a troubling situation. Reading a book, however, is an investment of time and concentration. "I never thought I could read a book this big," many tell us.

For those who make the investment, the result can be empowering *for them* and incredibly enlightening *for us*. These letters are windows to understanding this young generation – what the children think about, hope for, and fear. Recognizing that the youngest among them are just nine and ten years old makes what they write all the more remarkable. I sincerely hope you'll enjoy the national winning letters published here. Please know that each affiliate state Center for the Book awards prizes to the top essayists in its state. We simply do not have enough space to print all the letters from children who have expressed themselves so honestly and eloquently.

One hundred thousand letters. One hundred thousand children. If we do not listen, we risk too much.

**Catherine Gourley, LAL Project Director
Center for the Book in the Library of Congress**

LEVEL 1 National Winner: Britney Titensor

*Books are like journeys. When you open the cover, you don't know for certain where the author will take you or whom you'll meet along the way. While reading *The Breadwinner*, Britney traveled to Afghanistan. While there, she met someone who became a good friend.*

In a personal note to Britney, national judge Gary Hopkins wrote:

"Britney, I thought you did a beautiful job with your letter. What I appreciated most was the way you described your growing friendship with Parvana. Like the way a true friendship might develop, your connection to her was not immediate. It grew as you came to know her."

Dear Deborah Ellis,

Imagine two girls, both in the sixth grade but really quite different. The first girl lives in the arid desert of Afghanistan; the second, in the snowy mountains of Wyoming. The first girl educates herself by reading the banned books her father illegally hid, while the second attends school openly every day (even when she would rather be shopping). The first girl can only leave her house in secrecy for fear of being shot or beaten by soldiers. The second girl spends her time hanging out with friends or building snow forts in her yard. You know the first girl well. She is your courageous character, Parvana. The second girl is me. The remarkable thing is the friendship we developed through the pages of your book, *The Breadwinner*, a friendship that has changed my view of the world forever.

Each day as Parvana and I journeyed into the marketplace, we began to connect. I could understand the responsibility she felt to provide food for her younger brother and sister, because I too have younger siblings that I care for. Our encounter with the Taliban soldier and his tears taught us both a great lesson about understanding people who are different. I learned that we can never know who a person truly is just by the way they look. That is why it is so important to treat all people, even our enemies, with tenderness.

These lessons and my friendship with this young Afghan girl have changed me and my reaction to people I meet. You have given me a friend. You have given me Parvana, and Parvana will always be a part of who I have become.

Sincerely,

Britney Titensor
Thayne, Wyoming

LEVEL 1 National Winner: Phillip Brockman

Growing up is also a journey. Phillip Brockman discovered that along the way from childhood to adolescence he lost something he had once valued – his imagination. Author Michael Crichton helped him find it again. National judge John Micklos, editor of Reading Today, commented on Phillip's letter: "This is exceptionally well written." Notice how Phillip's closing paragraph mirrors his opening one.

Dear Michael Crichton,

*The ability to imagine is the largest part of what you call intelligence.
– Sphere*

This line from your book popped out of the page, danced around me, and hit me on the head. Imagination: It is like a little flame that keeps a mind alive, but if that flame goes out, although life goes on, a part of you dies. Both unfortunately and fortunately, I know this from personal experience.

When I was younger, imagination was one of my most treasured possessions. At the age of four, I spent hours in my rickety plywood tree house staring up at the sky creating the "Land of Little Wumps." At the age of six, I was fighting the Green Goblin with Spiderman. At the age of nine, I was dueling the evil wizard Zimmer. But since then, I have noticed my flame of imagination dying. The Little Wumps are nearly forgotten. I no longer have time for battles or duels with evil. What inflicted this change? Is it natural for this to happen? I thought it was an irreversible part of growing up – until I read *Sphere*.

I realized that my imagination diminished as my obligations grew. Over a period of four days, I could (and still) enjoy many activities ranging from violin to *tae kwon do* to math club. When not involved in these, I was studying for a test at school. All of these activities remain meaningful to me, but they left little time to dream and imagine. This left my world as colorful as a black-and-white television film – and as grainy.

In your book, Norman Johnson's life for fifty years was defined by facts. But in the end, in order to survive, he gave up his reliance on concrete beliefs and on the skills of others and turned toward his own imagination, courage, and strength. Norman learned from the "sphere" that the power of imagining is one of the strongest forces on Earth and that he actually had the power to control his destiny all along.

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(Level 1 National Winner: Phillip Brockman – continued)

I, like Norman, had started to put my belief in facts, believing in only what I could see or what could be proved, and relying mainly on the instruction of others. Unlike Norman, I will not wait until I am fifty years old to rediscover the ability to rely on my own power to problem-solve creatively. Since reading *Sphere*, I have felt that four-year-old Wump creator trying to live again. I am still as active as ever, but now I make sure to take time to lose myself in good books, laugh at myself when I make silly faces in the mirror, and allow sadness to flow when I remember those I have lost. Most important of all, I am learning to believe in my abilities to influence my destiny.

Sphere helped relight the candle of imagination inside of me. With this rejuvenated light, I can see the color in the world. Now it is up to me to keep that flame burning bright. Thank you for brightening the world.

Sincerely,

Phillip Brockman,
Thompson, North Dakota

LEVEL 1 National Runner-Up: Hannah Soyer

Dear Tamora Pierce,

Probably ever since I was born I've longed for adventure. More than anyone I know, I'd even spend my spare time reading about adventures and dreaming I was the hero or heroine. See, to others adventure is nothing new. It lies in their future like cats waiting to pounce. But my dreams of changing the world have always ended in me knowing that that will never happen: I've been confined to a wheelchair since birth. Even if I could go back in time, I wouldn't be able to take up the role of your heroine, Alanna. I probably wouldn't even have been able to lift a sword. My future was adventure-less.

As soon as I read your series *Song of the Lioness*, I knew I'd been wrong about my future for a very long time. Alanna's life reminded me so much of my own. I felt like I could sink into the pages of the book and tell the story myself. As Alanna changed from a nobody in *Alanna: The First Adventure* to a legend in *Lioness Rampant*, I could feel myself changing, too. I have as much chance of becoming a somebody and having adventures as anybody else. I'll just have to try harder than most people.

Being in a wheelchair doesn't seem like such a bad thing anymore. It can have its advantages. If I were just an ordinary girl, I probably would have read your series without thinking twice about it. If you can't choose your circumstances, such as being a girl or having muscular dystrophy, you might as well learn to overcome them. *Song of the Lioness* gave me faith and hope, and I'd like to thank you for opening a door for me.

Sincerely,

Hannah Soyer,
Johnston, Iowa

Level 1 National Runner-Up: Amy Tomasso

Dear Shannon Hale,

As a kid, I was always fairly shy. What I was afraid to say out loud, I created as dialogue for myself as the leading character in the invented stories of my mind. I'm still quiet, but not out of fear. The gentle wisp of bashfulness that hangs over me is because I just like to listen. These days, when I write a story, I make my heroines strong, passionate, courageous, memorable, and everything else you would imagine a heroine to be – everything I would like to be. Who wouldn't?

In Isi, the title character of *The Goose Girl*, I found the flesh-and-blood heroine in the novels of my privately imagined library. A sudden inspiration panged through me when I realized you had given my heroine a name, a purpose, a challenge. I recognized in Isi the heroine upon whom I strove to base my own female characters.

A certain cleverness hangs about Isi. Because of her gift in speaking to the wind, she is active and alert to signals carried through breezes. Though hard times wrench at her life, she does not continually despair; rather she accepts twists of fortune in a way that allows her to move forward. Her acceptance of changes in fate opens the gate to her own improvement. Throughout her ever-changing, unpredictable destiny, Isi has a way of keeping her wits about her.

Whenever I relive the turning points of *The Goose Girl*, my mind is filled with thoughts of a persuasive girl with tumbling blond hair and a keen knowledge of the world not available to ordinary humans. A savvy mind; a sensitive heart – it's all there. While aware of her ability to speak to nature, Isi knows how much she still has to learn. A certain scene from the book sums up all of Isi's inspiring actions and thoughts. It describes Isi pausing for a moment in her role of the goose girl to ride freely on her horse. The wind beating carelessly through her garments, her intent expression the way she flew through the air so effortlessly – it was as if she was amazed at the influence she had over her horse and the powers it held.

By the end of the book, it wasn't only my fictional characters who would become more like Isi; I would be more like her, too. I realized that if only everyone cared about life and friends in the way Isi did, we'd have a more engaged world. I admired her highly strategic mind and practical work ethic, and I was amused by her clever way of eavesdropping on conversations that held lifesaving information.

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(Level 1 National Runner-Up: Amy Tomasso – continued)

It's so easy to want to be like Isi, moreover to *be* Isi – to understand life's unexpected ways, to have an incredible way with words as well as a distinctive personality.

Because of her intense desire to succeed – not out of greed, but out of achievement – Isi survived her quest to live up to her own destiny and display a justice that saved the lives of countless citizens. When all things are said and done, you realize that life is too short to live it meekly, cowardly, hiding from your opinions and beliefs.

If I were to become the imagined heroine Isi is, would I too have had the courage to transform a desperate attempt to save my own life into a mission of achieving freedom for all?

Respectfully,

Amy Tomasso,
Farmington, Connecticut

Level 1 National Runner-Up: Jessi Glueck

Dear Esmé Raji Codell,

I sat on the sunlit couch, tears blurring my eyes as I read the last words in the book and let it slip from my hands. I felt torn apart, because though the ending was wonderful, it seemed so sad. I let the tears slip from my eyes as I thought of the little girl, her dad gone forever, learning to reconcile herself to the surprises life could throw at you when you were least expecting it. A ray of light fell on the cover of the book, illuminating the title *Sahara Special*. "Sahara was a special girl," I thought, "and *Sahara Special* was a special book."

I have read *Sahara Special* twice now, and it has made me see things in a different light every time. I never really understood how life was for someone who had to repeat a grade. It could have been so embarrassing, but somehow Sahara's teacher made her feel at home, more at home in the classroom than anywhere else. I never went through anything like this, living in a nice neighborhood and loving school from the start. But something in your book touched a nerve, made me think, "For all the huge differences that separate us, Sahara is just like me."

There's something in me that's always wanted the world to see what my life is like through my writing, and ever since I first read the book, I've fantasized about where I'd hide my memoirs. Considering how much I myself love to write, one of the big points about the book that drew me in was watching Sahara, an aspiring author, learn and grow behind closed doors. I also loved reading about how her teacher opened the doors up.

This book also confirmed what I have thought for a long time: One of the best ways to teach is to tell a story. The magic of "Miss Pointy" is that she taught important life lessons, things like sharing and kindness and courage and truth, simply by telling a story. Some may say that experience is the best way to learn, but I disagree; the most effective way is telling, or reading, a great story. *Sahara Special* itself is a lesson.

Though *Sahara Special* is a thin book, and though I have since moved on to Agatha Christie and P. G. Wodehouse, I think I'll be reading it again soon. Because the greatest lesson it taught is something we never grow out of: It taught me about that special person within us all.

Jessi Glueck,
Leawood, Kansas

Level 1 National Runner-Up: Justin Hazlewood

Dear Suzanne Moyers,

Before reading your story about Rudy Garcia-Tolson, I felt lonely. The reason is that I have a disability called Mild Cerebral Palsy, which was caused by a stroke when I was two days old, leaving my entire left side weak. This causes my balance to be somewhat thrown off and leads me to falling sometimes.

When my mom told me I could not participate in sports such as basketball and football, it really broke my heart. She told me I could play sports with my friends, but that was just not good enough for me. In some ways I felt secluded from all physical activities, and this really made me feel as if I didn't have a purpose for even my body. Somehow I knew the day would come when my body would be strong enough to participate in sports. I have faith that this day will come soon.

While reading your story about the triathlete Rudy Garcia-Tolson, a huge change occurred in my life. I felt an unbelievable amount of confidence, which just burst through me. Rudy was a double amputee who set goals for himself and actually accomplished the goals that he set. He did not see his legs as two mechanisms that would hinder him in accomplishing his dreams. I was surprised at the fact that he could beat the kids without disabilities in running, swimming, and biking. At this point I realized that I have a purpose, which is to hang on to my dream of playing sports.

Rudy, like me, saw his disability as an obstacle that he had to overcome. He was proud of himself, as I am of myself, because of all the hardships we have endured. He did not complain about his prosthetic legs. Nor did he live his life with regret. Even though Rudy watched the other kids play, that did not phase him. Nothing could stop him. He was an everlasting, energetic machine.

My family was there to see me through physical therapy, as Rudy's family's was there for him. They were also there to take me to my doctor's appointments. There was a lot of care given to me throughout my ordeal, but they did not treat me as if I were special. I was given the confidence and determination that I needed to believe that I could do anything I set my mind to.

Rudy was a big inspiration to me. At first I thought I would be limited in my daily life, but Rudy showed me that it was not true. He taught me that even though I have a leg problem, it does not mean that I cannot do any physical activities. It was as if he made the impossible possible. All together he taught me the most valuable lesson, and that is to pursue my dream.

Justin Hazlewood,
Chesterfield, Virginia

LEVEL 2 National Winner: Sophia Harrington

"Some letters just jump into your life!" said national judge and author Valerie Tripp. "From her first sentence, Sophia had my attention, just as she convincingly shows that Jenkins had hers." "In expressing what the book brought to her life, Sophia finds a poetic voice," said another judge. Vivid details and an informal, conversational style – Sophia's use of language distinguishes this letter, as does the message itself.

Dear Peter Jenkins,

Some books just jump into your life. I don't know how *A Walk Across America* came into mine, so the only explanation is that it jumped, jumped right there into my unexpected arms. And believe me, I'm glad it did.

I was in a secondhand shop looking at books to buy for our summer vacation, and out of all of them, my mom had picked this one. I put the book back on the shelf and walked away. Ten minutes later, I was back to the same book; it had drawn me like a magnet. Why? Absolutely nothing was great about it, and it didn't seem to catch my eye at all. Something must have caught, though, because before I knew it, I had paid for the book and was heading for the door.

Walking across the country was an experience and a half. Though my legs were not aching and a dog was not at my heels, I collected every experience like it was my own. You made sure I was next to you, not going too fast or too slow. I didn't just look at a black family sitting on a porch, a picture of the South; I lived, breathed, ate, and even went to church with them. I learned the ways of a lone mountain man and his trust for no one but me. I saw him fall down and cry; tasted his mutton stew. Mr. Jenkins, your words and descriptions led me by the hand and helped me live the lives of those I had never met.

The book I read was not a travel guide, or even a wannabe travel guide. It was the real deal, and it poured like rich, dark molasses from your very own soul. As you covered each mile, you faced a new emotional challenge, encountering new faces and trying to discover every life that was different from your own. Sometimes you didn't fit in. When you lived on the farming commune, the independent, carefree Peter Jenkins that I had come to know was hurting and suffocating in the sea of sameness that enveloped him. As a reader, this experience and others showed me where your heart was, how you felt about life, and where you might head next. It helped me too. By making connections to your experiences, I better understood my own values.

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(Level 2 National Winner: Sophia Harrington – continued)

Paperback drugstore novels are so tragic and heartbreaking, but in the end you know that they always turn out to be beautiful and pleasing. Your experiences were like one novel after the other. Families are poor but turn to each other for love. Rundown country stores attract the world's most eclectic characters. Everything fits together like a puzzle. That puzzle is not headline America; it's the country made up of everyday citizens that love to play cards, take pride in their day job at the car wash, and use engine parts as lawn decorations. It's real.

After I had removed my last pair of walking shoes, I knew that this was the real America. Whether it is harsh or beautiful and maybe a little "out there," it's the truth. The plain truth is what counts the most. Through truthful experiences and detailed writing, you showed me the most undressed and honest parts of my very own homeland.

Sophia Harrington,
West Hartford, Connecticut

LEVEL 2 National Winner: Lacie Craven

Coincidentally, both national winner Lacie Craven and national runner-up Amanda Reed (see next letter) wrote about coping with loss, specifically the death of an animal and the death of a sister. Although their situations and their reactions differ, each found comfort through a book they read. In their letters, each young woman reflects on how death affects them even after months have passed or, in Amanda's case, years. Instead of fearing death, however, both Lacie and Amanda choose to celebrate life. "Lacie's letter is refreshingly original," one judge commented. Said another, "I love her straightforward style and excellent word choice."

Dear Mrs. Rawlings,

I live near the ocean, under a mountain, on a farm. We raise a lot of different animals, but mostly sheep. We also hunt for our food. These things made me feel very close to the characters in *The Yearling*. If you have sheep, you have orphaned lambs. If you have orphaned lambs, you have true friends. They get into a lot of trouble (a lot like Flag!) but it's all worth it to have a little lamb that follows you and is dependent on you.

I remember Mattie, a lamb whose mother had refused to take her. I had heated up her bottle and fed her every two to three hours every day of her life. She would kick up her heels and run with me down the road, then push her plush little head into my hand. We would lie in the grass, and I talked with her about everything, and she listened as I felt her fragile little hoof and followed her tiny, warm curls. One day she got sick. I kept watch over her the whole day, praying hard and making her as comfortable as possible. I picked her up and held her tight, tracing the little swirl on the side of her face. I hoped to feel her lean her head against me. She didn't. She was dead. I reluctantly put her down and looked at her for the last time, covered her with a towel, stepped back, and said good-bye through tears to my lifeless friend. Afterward, I ran to the barn in secret and cried into my sister's lamb until it was time to feed him.

After each death, it feels like you lost a child. It is so devastating. I cry and feel like I did something wrong, like I could have prevented their deaths. I felt like I had trusted in God and he let me down, like He had forgotten about me. Why did He give me something only to take it away? Why didn't He heal her when I asked?

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(Level 2 National Winner: Lacie Craven – continued)

The answer came in your book. When I read about Jody and his fawn, at first I asked the same question. Why does this happen? Then I saw what Flag taught him. All my lambs had been working unintentionally to help me be who I am today and who I will be. They taught me how to deal with challenges in my life, how to overcome them. When it seems like I'm all alone, I'm really not.

*If I could change the
past and bring Mattie back
to life, I wouldn't.*

If I could change the past and bring Mattie back to life, I wouldn't. I look back now and I only smile. I continue to raise sheep, and always happiness prevails over death. In every way, when it seems like there is no good left in the world, you see it displayed in indirect ways. For every sad thing, there's a happy reason behind it, and it makes us stronger people. We can find rest in this. Thank you for writing this book.

Lacie Craven,
Bucks Harbor, Maine

LEVEL 2 National Runner-Up: Amanda Reed

Dear Alice Sebold,

When I picked up your book *The Lovely Bones*, I didn't know how it would affect me. I assumed I would just move on as I do after every book I read, but I was extremely wrong. When I was only two years old, my little sister, Alison, died just months before her first birthday. Since I was only two, I didn't really understand what had happened. I only knew that my parents were constantly crying and my Allie was gone.

After reading this book, I am frequently thinking about Allie, wondering if maybe she's sitting here with me, watching me write this letter. Reading this book aroused questions in my mind. What would Allie be like if she were here? Would she be a prep, a punk, a smart kid, my best friend? Would she love *Harry Potter*, like I do? Would she be easily distracted and aggravated by noises and beeps, like my dad and I are? Would she have inherited my mother's creative flare, like I did? Would we go to a My Chemical Romance concert together, or – God forbid – would she be a country-music fan? It makes me smile to think that she might have been a bit like me. But this also makes me miss her more.

At other times, I'm wondering what her heaven looks like. Is it just a huge baby crib? Or does she grow in heaven and fantasize about middle school, like Susie did about high school? When I read about Susie meeting her dog and grandfather in heaven, I cried at the thought of my Little PawPaw being with Allie. Even though I'm sad that she isn't here with me, it cheers me to know that someone I loved dearly, my Little PawPaw, is up there in heaven with her.

Now, after reading *The Lovely Bones*, I have a better understanding about how my parents felt when Allie died. (I'm glad my mom didn't do what Susie's mom did!) It must have been difficult for them to overcome, because I saw how Susie's dad was still depressed after ten years. Unlike Susie's father, my dad doesn't mope around the house, but I know he still misses her, especially on her birthday and on the anniversary of her death. I now understand why my mom worries about us and why she says things like, "I already lost one child, and I don't want to lose another one!" She does this because Allie's death still affects her. It always will.

I think I was destined to read this book so that I wouldn't forget my sister. For the very first time, I've begun to have conversations with my parents about Allie and how they feel about her absence. Since I was so young when she died, it just wasn't a topic we discussed, because it's uncomfortable. However, talking about her keeps her spirit alive for our family. *The Lovely Bones* has given us this opportunity, and I thank you for that.

Amanda Reed,
Lafayette, Louisiana

LEVEL 2 National Runner-Up: Colby Eisen

Dear Mr. Haddon,

I came across this quote: "Things do not change; we change." It was written by Henry David Thoreau, an American author, poet, and philosopher. This quote is a reflection of how your book changed my life.

During many trips to Stop & Shop with my mom, I noticed some workers who physically looked and acted differently. That scared me and made me nervous and uncomfortable. I did not really know what it was, just that it was a strange situation that I did not know how to deal with. It was not that the workers were coming over and doing anything to me, it was more the fact that they were not the usual people I was used to being around. I never talked to my mom about it, but I did note that they frightened me to the point where I glued myself to my mother's side.

When I recently read your novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the way I thought about people with mental disabilities changed. Reading this story from Christopher's perspective was a window into helping me better understand the similarities between the lifestyle of an autistic person and my own. This book changed my way of life. I no longer stay attached to my mother's side in a supermarket or avoid people who are different, and for that, I thank you.

After reading *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, I volunteered for a community service project that dealt with children with mental or physical disabilities. It was a program in which disabled children got to ride horses. In the past years, I never thought I would ever be comfortable enough around disabled people to work with them, much less on horseback. Just the fact that I stepped out of my comfort zone and out of my shell, made me realize just how much this book actually changed me.

When my mom recommended this book, I did not think much of it. She recommends a lot of books that I never really like. But I am so grateful that I picked this one up and gave it a try, because it has made a tremendous impact on my life. Of course, autistic people do not change. I changed, and I owe it all to your book.

Colby Eisen,
Mt. Kisco, New York

LEVEL 2 National Runner-Up: Kylee Drugan-Eppich

Dear Jenni Schaefer,

I'm not really sure how it started, but I remember looking in the mirror one day and hating what I saw. I saw an imperfect body looking back at me. As a runner, I thought that if I were thinner, I would be faster. So in January 2005, I began to starve myself, and I continued through June. But it didn't completely stop there. By then my pants barely held on to my bony hips, and my shirts hung loosely around my curled-in shoulders. My parents were worried, yet I denied everything. My mom finally confronted me about how thin I was getting and how little I was eating. So I gave in.

Once I started talking, I couldn't stop. I cried and cried. I cried for the pain I had gone through. I cried out of relief, because I knew that my pain was going to end. I talked about how I thought I would be noticed if I were thin. I talked about how this voice inside my head told me what to do, and I never dared to disobey. I thought that the voice would bring me happiness. I told my mom everything. I finally realized I was scared of what I was doing to myself. I was scared of the voice inside my head. I wanted to stop letting it control me. My mom didn't really understand what I was going through at the time, but she tried. And I knew that she was someone I could count on to help me.

Your book, *Life Without Ed*, helped me through a really hard time in my life. My year-long battle with anorexia was difficult and painful. You helped me separate myself from my eating disorder. I learned like you did to call this monster "Ed," using the acronym for "eating disorder." It helped me realize that it wasn't me beating myself up over food. It was Ed. Sometimes I wish I had never admitted to my parents that I was starving myself to become thin. But I immediately recognized that voice as Ed's. After I had established that, I began to see what kind of person I really was. I realized I wasn't the person whose only goal was to become emaciated. I wanted to live, and Ed wanted me to starve myself to death. I want to become an Olympic runner. *He* wouldn't make that possible.

Things became better, but slowly. I would start eating again, then Ed would pop in his two cents, and all of a sudden he was in charge. *He* always promised me that I would be happy once I was thin, but all I would be was irritable, cold, and sad. I was cold ALL THE TIME. I couldn't focus well, either. Just reading a book, I would start a paragraph, read a couple of sentences, and then my mind would slip away. Then I would have to read those same sentences over again.

I hated that life. I hated being controlled by Ed. So that's why I read your book, as a recommendation from my therapist. It changed my life so much, and it changed the way I look at myself now. I think that if I hadn't read it, I wouldn't believe the things my doctors told me. I would still be in denial. And all that Ed has done is deny me the happiness of living. You helped me divorce him after the months we were married, and I want to thank you for that. Now I know that I'm not the only teenage girl who suffers from this horrible eating disorder.

Kylee Drugan-Eppich,
Madbury, New Hampshire

LEVEL 2 National Runner-Up: Danielle Enrique

Dear Harper Lee,

Last summer I picked up *To Kill a Mockingbird* out of boredom, as I can grow restless in the heat and inactivity. I fell in love with it instantly. It taught me and reinforced so many lessons in life that I had ignored previously. The characters touched me. I feel I could walk in a crowd, spot them, and know them as if they were my best friends. But the biggest reason I can identify with your novel is because it deals with racism.

I am a young adult of mixed race, and I have dealt with racism enough to have no tolerance for it. *To Kill a Mockingbird* helped me see why people were racist. They were raised that way and know nothing else. They were taught to fear difference. Racism is still a sign of ignorance and fear, but now I have more compassion for these people who were not as fortunate as I to be raised in an open-minded home. I won't fly into a rage. Rather, I will pity them and hope that they can see the injustice of their treatment of other races.

The second thing you taught me was the hurt gossip causes. I am content with who I am, and confidence has never been a problem. I could care less about gossip going around about me. The way gossip hurt Boo Radley hit me like a brick wall displaying the message REALITY CHECK. Gossip hurts people in ways I could never imagine. Now I watch what I say and make sure I don't talk about people behind their backs. Your book helped me realize that everybody doesn't have the confidence I have. That helped me understand and grow closer to a friend with a different personality than mine.

I identified with the characters. I tried in the same way Jem tried to understand racism. I shared Scout's impatience for the etiquette of the South that viewed women as inferior. I admired Tom and Atticus for their bravery. I marveled at Arthur Radley's good deeds, even after all the hatred he had been shown. By following their examples and emulating their best characteristics, we can strive to be the greatest we can be.

Amazingly, I have read your book four times and learn something every time. Not many books do that for people, which is yet another reason I hold your book close to my heart.

Thank you,

Danielle Enrique
Mooresville, NC

LEVEL 3 National Winner: Jeehyun Choi

"Articulate . . . powerful coming-of-age story" said our national judges. "I was as intrigued by Jeehyun's own life as I was by her connection to the book." Although Jeehyun's letter differs dramatically in tone from the letter written by our second level-3 national winner Martha Park (see next letter), both young readers/writers explore loneliness and relationships in very distinct ways.

Dear Mr. Hedges,

My mom isn't fat. My dad didn't commit suicide. My sister isn't mentally retarded. And I certainly don't live in a little lowan town with two grocery stores. But I connected with your book *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* because I am a youth and *do* have a family – a family with its highs and lows, a family that bickers and rejoices – just like Gilbert's family.

I read *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* at the end of a hot, sticky summer, shortly after my dad had left for Korea, not to return until December. My sister was going through adolescence wrapped in punk music and veils that no one could penetrate, like Ellen. I spent day after day in my room to avoid arguing with my mom. Even though I felt my family drift apart, I blamed it on their lack of understanding. On top of that, I was depressed and confused about the crossroads at which I stood. I was ambitious to do great things after high school but was scared of the fog that shrouded the path I might choose.

*I stopped reading before Chapter 8.
But . . . their incessant voices drove me
to pick up the book again.*

Therefore, when I started this book and realized that the central character, Gilbert Grape, is someone who "did nothing after high school," I was quite disappointed. At first sight, he seemed pessimistic, uncertain, and listless. It was as if he already acquiesced to a hapless fate. And his family was worse – a bunch of hopeless people with innumerable problems! I scorned the images of these clownish, almost grotesque characters. Frustrated, I stopped reading before chapter 8.

But soon after, I realized that I couldn't stop thinking of the broken Grape family, especially Gilbert. Momma's yells rang in my ears, along with Arnie's high, distorted voice. Every moment when there were raised voices within my own family, I kept relating to the Grapes. Their incessant voices drove me to pick up the book again.

(continued on next page)

(Level 3 National Winner: Jeehyun Choi – continued)

This time, I was sucked into the story like a ship in a whirlpool. As I shadowed Gilbert's life in Endora, I slowly grew attached to him; he is the most humane character I have ever come across in a book. He is honest but has secrets. He carries love with hatred, he feels loneliness with solitude, and he has gentleness in anger. How can any character be more realistic? And furthermore, like me, he hasn't found his identity. Although we lived in totally different situations, his thoughts and fears were the mirror image of my own. He was me.

Through Gilbert's healing, I believe that I gained a better understanding of myself. As he fell in love with Becky and released his compressed and complex emotions bit by bit, I earnestly cheered for him to let go. I cried as he tried to laugh away his painful childhood memories of his father's death. My tears gave way to the realization that he faced the same obstacle that I did – the fear of remembering the past and revealing the person who I was, who I am, and who I might be. On the other hand, I could not resist secretly smiling when Gilbert hit Arnie, the one who "nobody hits" because it was beautiful in a sense – the subtle catharsis after endless heroism and saintly devotion. He refused to let remorse or anger eat him away, but instead learned how to fight against them. It was a triumph.

I followed Gilbert's progress toward fully embracing his family with a lump in my throat. I was utterly touched to see him take on so many burdens and still manage to save room for genuine love. His relationship with Ellen gave me a chance to reflect on my distant attitude toward my own sister. At the end of the book, when he finally embraces his sister, I too approached my sister with open arms. When I did, it brought laughter and warmth back to both of our hearts. Thank you, Mr. Hedges, for reminding me how much I love my family at a time when I was detached from them. Through your book I learned how to understand their faults rather than to blame, and to love each of them for who they are. Furthermore, I also discovered that there isn't a single way to a beautiful life, because life comes in countless different hues, with the small things that matter.

At the end of a hot, sticky summer that could have drained hope, I found courage in the name Gilbert Grape.

Love,
Jeehyun Choi,
St. Paul, Minnesota

LEVEL 3 National Winner: Martha Park

If books are indeed journeys, then so too are some letters about those books. Martha Park takes her readers down a city street on a cold night. Without summarizing the novel, yet capturing its essence, Martha shows us in subtle strokes how one author influenced how she perceives the city that is her home. National judge Dr. Bonnie Culver, a playwright and professor at Wilkes University, wrote: "Martha not only 'shows' Salinger's influence, she becomes him in her world and shows us how children are lost. Very poetic, lyrical writing."

To J. D. Salinger,

This city needs a soft place to fall as much as I need a soft place to lay my head. These wide streets glitter sadly, beer bottles casting out lonesome rays under the soft glow of streetlights. Down the road a man stumbles out of a bar, howling with laughter as lonely and meaningless as these streets.

I think of you as I walk, cold and clutching a sketchbook and a marker. I think of Holden Caulfield, too, as the lost innocence of this city that bears down on me, and that he would understand. Holden to me is a sort of unlikely saint. He is a saint of roller-skate skinny little girls and ducks in winter and corny piano players.

I know he would be sad, too, if he could turn the corner with me and if he could feel this long, cold street shudder as an eight-year-old street kid flips himself around and around, slow motion, his hands and feet meeting the cobblestone ground with a dull thud on each round. His older brother passes a yellow plastic bucket through the crowd of shivering onlookers.

The small boy twists and turns through the air, his eyes shut tightly. As he passes by me, I think I can almost hear him singing, "If a body catch a body, coming through the rye."

When the bucket gets around to me, I stuff a few meaningless bills in among the others. They're all I have to show for my stumbling empathy, and I turn my back and continue walking, the concrete pounding with my head, as behind me the boy continues to fly through the air. A child who here can never stay a child skips ahead of me down the curb past the dirty graffiti-covered walls that are his hateful education.

This city is dead weight waiting for a transformation. It is heavy, like Allie's left-handed baseball glove covered in poems, and Sunny's green dress in the closet. This city is a sad collection of lights and empty laughter in opaque glass bottles on the side of the road. This city is running fast toward the edge of a cliff. This is a city in need of a Holden Caulfield.

If there's one thing I've learned from your words through Holden, it's to be true to who I am. I don't want to be counted in Holden's long list of "phonies" – of Ossenburgers and Sally Hayeses, and Robert Ackleys. Holden awakened in me a sense of responsibility for these awkwardly crumbling souls and streetlights and sidewalks.

Tonight, turning to look at the walls covered in scrawled, angry messages to those retaining a bit of hope, I think of you and your Holden. Uncapping my marker, I look carefully for a space on the wall, and when I find it, I leave my own message: *Holden Caulfield was here*. And he is. He's in me and he's in this city and he's in the healing that must take place here. Thank you for him.

Martha Park,
Memphis, Tennessee

LEVEL 3 National Runner-Up: Lauren Hefferon

“Lost and found” is a common theme many young writers touched upon in their letters this year. For Lauren Hefferon, a short story challenged her faith but helped her discover a new spiritual strength. For Lind Dang (see next page), a novel she read as a much younger child uncovered a family history and a realization of what might not have been if history had dealt her family a different hand.

Dear Miguel de Unamuno,

When I began translating your short story “San Manuel Bueno, Mártir,” with Spanish-English dictionary in hand, I expected to find little more than headaches and hard work in front of me. The language was difficult and at times colloquial, forcing me to repeatedly consult my teacher, my idiom dictionary, and other books in order to simply understand its words. Reading a page could take me a solid two hours and result in an enormously long list of new vocabulary for me to learn. Deciphering the story’s meaning presented an even more daunting challenge.

I kept at it, though – in part out of my fear of receiving a “B” on my term paper, and also because I really wanted to understand the story. By the time I had read the first two paragraphs alone, I understood the beauty of its language, and not long after that I realized that the story was truly a poignant account of human life, full of suffering and sacrifice. As the story progressed, I began following the struggle of Don Manuel as if he were a real person. I found I had a burning desire to understand his troubles, his motivations, and his fears. His crisis of faith as a Catholic priest was intriguing and profoundly sad, and I connect with the novella instantly at a time in my life when I had just begun to doubt my own integrity as a Catholic.

I finished the story, having put aside the dictionary, with tears streaming down my face. I cried for Don Manuel’s fate and his acceptance of his own hopelessness, but I also cried because I knew as I finished the reading that I too had disconnected with a part of my own faith. I felt a new emptiness, and a strange confidence, in my unspoken decision to separate from my religion. The story had somehow given me greater freedom to make a personal distinction between the accepted Catholic wisdom and my own troubling doubts. My guilt at challenging the Church, even privately, transformed into calm, unwavering belief that I was capable of connecting independently with my spirituality.

In the months that followed, I told my parents that I did not plan to be confirmed – a process essential to becoming an adult member of the Church. Their arguments could not dissuade me from my decision, and in the end, they came to respect my choice, even though it came as a clear disappointment. When the Church announced its new pope, I wrote a letter to the editor expressing my discontent with Catholicism. Upon its publication, I received a number of responses via phone calls, e-mails, and follow-up editorials, some that condemned me as a heretic and others that affirmed my every word. The controversy I had sparked told me that I had indeed touched a nerve and convinced me even more completely that my instincts spoke the truth.

“San Manuel Bueno, Mártir” offered me the confirmation for which I had been searching. The story voiced the very concerns I had been hiding, feeling ashamed, and expressed an internal struggle I feared might be unique to me. Ironically, though my choice to articulate my doubts lies entirely opposite the decision made by Don Manuel, I nonetheless found my own courage of conviction in the story’s stunning expression of the forces of human love and the power of personal sacrifice.

Lauren Hefferon,
West Hartford, Connecticut

LEVEL 3 National Runner-Up: Linh Dang

Dear Ms. Garland,

Now that you have read about your Chinese culture, how about trying your other half? A Vietnamese story. I hope you enjoy it. Tell me all about it when you're done. 9/1/00.

This was the note that I found from my aunt, scrawled on the inside cover of your book, *Song of the Buffalo Boy*. How was I to know, a mere fourth grader at the time, that what I would read would allow me a view into a whole other world?

My parents were born in Vietnam slightly before the Communist Vietcong fought a war against the South Vietnamese. The Americans stepped in to aid the South Vietnamese, a side my own grandfather was on, but he left before the war was over. North Vietnam won the war and changed Vietnam from what appeared to me as simple sugarcane-and-rice farms into a Communist country. My parents fled to America, as did my grandparents and my mother's sisters. Thousands escaped. However, what happened to those left behind? *Song of the Buffalo Boy* helped me answer this question.

*Dreams shattered like dropped
glass, families separated . . .*

By reading this story, I was able to view the country where my parents grew up and understand what happened after they left. Even though I am not Amerasian (as are the half-American, half-Vietnamese children), I was still able to acknowledge the distressing fates of the children left behind. The mothers and the children lived their lives shunned, insulted daily, and sometimes physically wounded. Through this book, I could understand some of the changes the Vietnamese experienced. Dreams shattered like dropped glass, families separated, and men who fought for Vietnam not complaining as sickness and pain ravaged their lives, leaving them with nothing afterward.

I am able to better appreciate the escapes of my family and how hazardous it was for them. They risked capture and jail for freedom, floating away from everything they knew on boats. I am thankful that my grandfather was able to make it to the United States alive; I am thankful that he only had to suffer two years in jail where because of his service for South Vietnam, rather than a lifetime. From *Song of the Buffalo Boy*, I was able to comprehend how difficult it was to leave Vietnam after the war. It would take months for people who were getting through the Amerasian Homecoming Program to leave. This book helped open my eyes, and for this, I am grateful.

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(Level 3 National Runner-Up: Linh Dang – continued)

The main character, Loi, inspired me in such a way that I too would like to possess some of her traits. I try to stay optimistic in everything I do and remain strong. Like Loi, who lived on the streets yet still managed to keep a semipositive twist on their thoughts. Even though my family can irritate me, I have to remind myself to be patient and love them even with their faults. I wish to never have to experience all of the physical and verbal adversity Loi had to go through in the course of the book, but I do hope to have the same (however clichéd this sounds) “true love” that she and the poor buffalo boy Khai had. I believe in happy endings, and I am sure that if I remain true and good, what will stop me from making my own happy ending?

*I believe in happy endings . . .
if I remain true and good, what will stop
me from making my own happy ending?*

When my father and grandfather drift off into their memories, I do not mind lending an ear, because suddenly, I can go to a country that I've never been to and take in quiet recollections of a missed place that will never be the same. I can connect to the people that I love, and I will remember this book for helping me do so. Their memories and the silent demonstration of strength that my family has endured to move to a new country with nearly nothing is inspiring, and I want to reach accomplishment now, so in the future I can better show appreciation to my family.

Linh Dang,
Cranston, Rhode Island

LEVEL 3 National Runner-Up: Iris Lee

*Iris Lee lost something while reading *Empress Orchid* – her unwavering belief that history always gets the past right. What did she find? She discovered a new confidence in her own ability to interpret what she reads and to form her own conclusions. “The discipline of history will be better for her participation,” wrote national judge Kathy Egawa.*

Dear Anchee Min,

Last summer, as I waited for my flight home, I stood in a bookstore at Chicago’s O’Hare Airport. My eyes perused the shelves for something to keep me entertained on my upcoming trip. The gold cover imprinted with oriental pillar designs certainly caught my attention – especially when I saw the image of the Chinese robe-donned woman in the middle. I looked at the title, *Empress Orchid*, and bought it without reading the back cover; I was already on page 50 before I boarded the plane. Needless to say, I finished it before I arrived home.

Although I am a Chinese girl born and raised in America, I have a magnetic fascination with the story of my heritage. Even though I am only a sophomore in high school, I know that I want to become a professor of Asian history. The dynastic kings amaze me with their authority and dangerous folly, but I relish learning about their concubines even more. Something in the way the court’s marital system was set up and the way women vied for their sons to become the next king evokes intrigue in me. Because of my interest, I used to recognize Empress Orchid’s name as one associated with manipulative power-thirst and unfettered greed. I had learned from my mom and even my world-history textbook that Tzu Hsi was largely responsible for China’s demise at the hands of the revolutionaries. She was a woman who had ruined her country, just like hundreds of other concubines in dynasties before her.

Halfway through the first paragraph of the prelude, you wrote “Not a day has gone by when I haven’t felt like a mouse escaping one more trap.” At this point, I could tell that your book was going to question every belief I held about Empress Tzu Hsi. After I read, “The mandarins and autocrats . . . are not here to discuss matters of state after my death, but to press me into naming one of their sons as heir,” my prediction was confirmed. I was going to learn something new.

I followed Empress Orchid through her tumultuous marriage to the rather dimwitted, chauvinistic Emperor Hsien Feng; her bearing of a son who failed to appreciate her and instead chose to follow another empress, who brainwashed him; and her winning over her people. I realized that she was a human. She was not necessarily some monstrous, disaster-brewing concubine who had destroyed the Q’in Dynasty.

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(Level 3 National Runner-Up: Iris Lee – continued)

As I closed the book, I began to back away from the mind-set of a reader speeding through an exciting book. I began to question. According to your book, my mind had been filled with falsehoods about Empress Tzu Hsi. Did this mean that everything I knew about history was not true?

This question was particularly important to me as I became more and more entrenched in the dream to become a history professor. I pondered and questioned all the historical facts I knew – from Ponce de León to Napoleon to Empress Tzu Hsi. Of course, records told the stories of the old days. But just like in today's media, bias and imprecision must have made these accounts less accurate. After much reflective thinking, I concluded that I really didn't know anything for sure.

I used to be an explorer searching for the truth, and I always found it. Now, because *Empress Orchid* so strikingly contrasted with my previous beliefs about Tzu Hsi, I am still learning. But I know that should I come across something that appears to be reality, I need to accept it with caution. Thank you for showing Empress Tzu Hsi in a different light. Furthermore, thank you for showing me that historical "truth" may not be truth at all.

Iris Lee,
Chandler, Arizona

WHAT TEACHERS TELL US

- It has been another illuminating time guiding my students through writing letters for your program. It's so much more than a contest! We all travel through books. They're not all frigates – there are rowboats, sloops, barges, tugboats, canoes, kayaks, umiaks – and when the boat fits the traveler, we know!
– Susan Washko, Charlottesville, Virginia
- We revised and revised and revised and we shared our letters with classmates. This is an assignment that students loved as much as I did. Their writing improved with each draft. They became better communicators, and they began to understand what it really means to correspond. Their writing will never be the same.
– Annette Weber, Sandy, Utah
- This type of reader response really forced the children to evaluate not only what they read, but how they respond or process what they have read. It was quite difficult for some to put into words why or how they connected to the books they read. Others had to reevaluate the choices they made in the past or why they had not yet found a book, poem, or other form of literature that they could connect to. This competition initially was going to be an alternative to the dreaded book report. Instead, it became a great chance for the children to experience, share, and look at literature in a different way. No wrong answers, only a chance to learn more about themselves. . . .
– Karen Stewart, Mercer Island, Washington
- The only negative aspect of this process is that now I have a *very* long summer reading list!
– Mrs. M. Oplinger, Hazleton, Pennsylvania
- One of the things recommended in literacy courses is writing for a real audience. Yours is one of the most realistic contests offered. My students worked diligently on their entries. The fact that they groaned when I said they would need to wait until spring for results shows how much they are invested in this opportunity to share their feelings about books that have made an impact on their lives.
– Enoia Couture, Waterville, Maine
- I'd like to thank you for making this contest available to students. It is a genuine good thing. Many writing contests are disguises for indoctrination campaigns, but I see none of that here – except to encourage students to read, to reflect, and to communicate. The LAL contest is truly a literacy campaign.
– David L. Miller, St. Charles, Missouri
- At first, students were stymied about how *not* to write a fan letter. Continual coaching, encouragement, and your excellent guidelines (teaching files you sent via e-mail) helped them correspond with authors in a revelatory way. This was a new way of writing for them. Their initial intensity about wanting to *win* became redirected as we practiced applying your lesson-plan ideas.
– Kate Denault, Mountainside, New Jersey
- This contest is a first for my students in so many ways – first writing contest, first personal connection with a character, and first personal connection with an author. Kudos to the Library of Congress, Target, and other state sponsors for bringing this opportunity to students.
– Jeanne Shilstone, Plano, Texas

NOTE: In December 2005, Letters About Literature and our affiliate state Centers for the Book received more than 48,000 letters from young readers across the country. More than 150 state-level prizes were awarded in three competition levels: upper elementary, middle school, and high school.

The letters go through two or more rounds of reading to select state semifinalists. From these semifinalists, the top essayists for each state on each competition level are chosen. First-place winners only from each state then advance for national judging. The entire process takes three months! The Center for the Book in the Library of Congress and Target congratulate all participants for their honest, thoughtful, sometimes painful, and sometimes amusing letters. Your responses to literature never fail to move and impress us! This is an annual reading-and-writing promotion program.

LAL is an annual competition. Guidelines for LAL 2007 are available in August 2006 and can be found at www.loc.gov/letters or by contacting the project director at lettersaboutlit@epix.net.

Target is proud to sponsor the Letters About Literature program.

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